"DON'T CALL IT LOVE"
LUKE 9:46-56
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There is something deeply rooted in all of us that wants to possess what we love: that wants clear boundries and a sense that this is mine to love and therefore not yours. There is something deeply rooted in us that needs the precious certainty that my loves, my loyalties, are the right ones and yours are the wrong ones. That something, whatever we decide to call it, can transform our purest devotion into the worst bigotry rather quickly. That need of ours can, and often does, turn our deepest love into the pettiest of jealousies. It is, in fact, the opposite of love. It destroys love.

The New Testament Lesson this morning bunches three separate incidents together that seem, at first, unrelated. But they do deal with the same human weakness with which I introduced the topic, and my conclusion is that they are together in order to teach us a lesson; an important lesson in the particular nature of Christian love.

The text begins as the disciples are arguing about which of them is the greatest, a not uncommon dispute among men. Muhammad Ali comes right out and says it "I am the greatest": most of us play the game silently, covertly, but playing nevertheless; comparing our looks, clothes, accomplishments, abilities with others and discovering that it feels rather good to be able to conclude that "I am the greatest - or at least I'm better than you."

Jesus knew what was going on. He stood a child by his side and suggested that true greatness might be compared to childlikeness.

And then, without any transitional material at all, John blurts out the incident involving a man casting out demons in Jesus' name. "We tried to stop him" John explained, "because he wasn't one of us." We may not be allowed to gauge each other in order to feel a sense of greatness, that is to say, but surely we don't have to allow any others in our club.
Jesus said, "Do not try to stop him. He who is not against you is for you."

And then the third incident involving a Samaritan village. It is a little more complex. There was a century old conflict between the Jews and Samaritans. Over the years it had become a deep and abiding hatred based on religion, race and politics. They had nothing to do with each other. That's what made the Parable of the Good Samaritan so very dramatic: the fact that a Samaritan turned out to be the good man. In any case it was about this time that Jesus decided to go to Jerusalem for the Passover. "He set his face toward Jerusalem" is the way the Gospels describe it, as if to serve notice that it was no casual decision. Rather it involved a radical turning toward probable death. The atmosphere, that is to say, was highly charged.

The most direct route from Galilee to Jerusalem went through Samaria, but for obvious reasons Galilean Jews didn't ordinarily go that way. The Samaritans didn't take kindly to any Jews in their territory, and if they discovered that the Jews were on their way to Jerusalem they would surely harass and attack them.

So, it was a rather unusual and significant thing for Jesus to want to go that way. It was even more unusual - and significant - for him to send messengers ahead to prepare for a stop-over in a Samaritan village. It was an unheard of gesture of love and friendship; an act of the highest intention - Jesus, on his way to conflict and confrontation with his own people, asking for the hospitality of his people's bitterest enemies.

Well, the Samaritans didn't know all that. To them a Jew was a Jew, and a party of religious pilgrims could mean trouble in the middle of the night and so they acted, I'd say, rather understandably. They wanted no part of it. The messengers returned with the word that the villagers had refused to have them for the night. And it was just too much for James and John, brothers, nicknamed "The Sons of Thunder" because of their temper and passion. They were insulted, hurt, angry - on his behalf - but really on their own behalf. They felt the snub, the humiliation of having extended

something and then having had it thrown back in their faces. And the whole century of hatred came to the surface as they asked "Lord, may we call down fire from heaven to burn them up?" There is Biblical precedent for that, by the way. The prophet Elijah dealt with his enemies in precisely that manner. (2 Kings 1:9-16)

At this point the mood changes, although that isn't easily apparent from the way the text is translated. Jesus "turned and rebuked them". That doesn't mean he said "Cut it out now, fellas". He rebuked evil spirits, wind and waves on the Sea of Galilee - and here - two disciples. He condemned it strongly. He disassociated himself entirely from that approach. He would have nothing to do with it.

In all three of these incidents the dynamic that I described earlier is at work. In the first, between the disciples themselves: in the second, between the disciples as a group and an outsider - a non-member: in the third, between the disciples as a part of a larger religious - national group and people who represented a different religious -national group. It's here in all three - the components of love, devotion, loyalty, some how coming out as jealousy, chauvinism and bigotry.

There is, we must admit, something admirable about the disciples in all three incidents. There is something admirable about wanting to be great in the service of Christ, something noble about wanting to protect the integrity and purity of the Christian Fellowship, something very human about wanting a little vengeance on the enemies of one's people.

We know that it was wrong of the disciples to want to destroy a whole village because of the insult to Christ. But isn't it really just a matter of loving too much too zealously. And isn't it better to love too much than too little. Isn't it better to be on the side of enthusiasm than to care not at all. We knew a year or two ago the wrongness of destroying entire villages in South Viet Nam. When an officer said that a village had to be destroyed in order to save it from Communism we knew

that was wrong. But it had no real effect on us because it was done in the name of patriotism, love of country, loyalty to Democracy. It was wrong - but we understood it and forgave it and forgot it. And those who had the Christ-like courage to "rebuke" it found rather quickly that it was not a very popular thing to do.

Our attitude generally about these three levels of human weakness - jealousy, chauvinism, bigotry - is that they are undesirable but tolerable, and understandable, because after all they issue from sincere and single-minded love. My proposal this morning is that what is happening at all three levels - and in all three Biblical incidents is not love at all, but rather a failure of Love. Let look at that for a moment.

In a sense, the disciples argued with each other because they were jealous. Each of them loved Jesus. Each had a claim staked on his love: a bit of him that belonged to them. And they were jealous of what they thought they possessed. For the same reason they were jealous when an outsider used his name. He had no right to do that.Jesus belonged to them.

Jealousy - and it's impossible to discuss the idea apart from the institution of Holy Matrimony - is often excused as a product of love. When we feel it, and we all do at times, we are inclined to rationalize it as a matter of loving so much. "If I didn't care about you - if I didn't love you - I wouldn't be jealous." Translate that: "my jealousy is actually a compliment!" We are so very ingenious at that kind of logic.

The trouble is jealousy implies ownership. It is not the same as envy. Envy develops when you see something you do not have and would like to have. Jealousy is aroused in relation to that which you already possess.

And before we excuse our own jealousy it is only fair to acknowledge that it is not a natural, normal human response: in fact, it is learned. There are cultures in which it just doesn't exist. (See Open Marriage,P.237) It is part of marriage in our culture because marriage has, for centuries, implied ownership.

Now I am not suggesting that fidelity is not important in marriage. Quite to the contrary, it is all important. I am suggesting that jealousy has very little to do with it, and in fact can easily destroy the relationship it is intended to protect.

It is very doubtful that you can love someone who you think you own. But more to the point, the psychologists tell us that jealousy is almost always the result of feelings of insecurity and self-doubt. Abraham Maslow put it bluntly: "Jealousy practically always breeds further rejection and deeper insecurity", which obviously will cause more jealousy. And if uninterupted by personal growth, by understanding and trust,jealousy will surely cause love to wither and die.

The second level is Chauvinism; not the much maligned male variety, but the kind that says my group is best: the super-patriotism that says my nation is best - and good: while all the rest are second - rate and essentially bad. We've got that in our midst too, and it is always dangerous. One writer put it this way: "an awful lot of people mistake their distrust or dislike of other peoples for patriotism - for love of their own country." (Models for Ministers)

When it is cut loose and amplified it can be deadly.and dangerous. Patriotism, properly cultivated and nurtured can be used to justify any means so long as the end - glorification of one's own country is accomplished. Thus in the name of the Fatherland the rape of Europe was accomplished by Hitler, and in the name of the purity of the German State 6,000,000 Jews were elliminated. In the name of Patriotism, the Russians continue to persecute, harass and imprison their greatest spirits. Alexander Solzhenitsyn is today in exile - in the name of patriotism. In the name of racial purity, Black men were lynched for looking at white women. And today, there are those who in the nam e of Democracy, or in the name of national security, are willing to excuse the infringement of liberty, privacy, freedom of speech and assembly.

That's not love of country: that's a failure of love.

The third level, and perhaps the most important because itdeals with the heart, is philosophic or religious. Nowhere does deep love become fanaticism and then bigotry quite as clearly as in things religious. In fact, religion, that may be called man's noblest endeavor, has - at many points in history, been his shabbiest. And for the same reason. Religion appeals to the deepest love - the strongest emotions - the worst fears - the highest hopes. Precisely because it deals with intense emotions, it can go awry. Precisely because it calls us to love so much, it can see that love turn to blind fanaticism.

Some of the saddest chapters in history began with the love of men for God, and their devotion to his church. The Spanish Inquisition was based on the very simple premise that in Jesus Christ God had revealed his truth to mankind, and that that truth ought to be preserved and protected. That it involved torturing and executing men who differed could somehow be excused in the name of love.

In the Middle Ages the church gave itself to the preservation of purity by hounding heretics. Men were burned at the stake for believing ideas that differed from orthodoxy - in the name of love.

That arrogance of many Christian missionaries in the 19th and early 20th centuries conveyed the same fanatic love for God. And it came across as patronization and imperialism.

Or consider the centuries of hostility between Catholics and Protestants: loving the same God, following the same Lord, and fighting each other to the death all too often. Consider the depth and profundity of hatred that exists in Northern Ireland today - in the name of Jesus Christ.

Great Christian leaders have always seen the danger of religious loyalty becoming simple bigotry, and the absolute necessity for Christ's own spirit of tolerant love to infect his people.

John Wesley, founder of Methodism, could not have disagreed more with

Roman Catholicism, but he was unbending on the subject of tolerance. "I have no more right", he said, "to object ot a man for holding a different opinion from mine than I have to differ with a man because he wears a wig and I wear my own hair; but if he takes the wig off and shakes the powder in my face, I shall consider it my duty to get quit of him as soon as possible... The thing I resolved to prevent was a .....miserable bigotry which makes many so unready to believe that there is any work of God but among themselves." (Barclay, Daily Study Bible, Luke P.131)

His own nephew, Samuel, joined the Roman Catholic Church and he wrote, "Whither in this Church or that, I care not. YOu may be saved in either or damned in either."

There is a simpler story, however, that says it all. A little boy was playing on the beach and brought a bucket of water to his father , saying: "I have the ocean in my bucket." So, men have always wanted to assume that they were carrying the entirity of God's truth around in their own theological buckets. So today, there are individuals and churches, although no longer burning people for heresy in the name of Jesus Christ, which say to the world - to us - to anyone who will listen: "The ocean is in our bucket". And the answer is: "Yes, it is: but there's lots more where that came from, and it's not all in your bucket."

Religious parochialism, arrogance and bigotry are not the result of love. Rather it is once again a failure of love.

The appeal is obvious: jealousy, chauvinism , bigotry touch us at perhaps our weakest point. It would be good to know that our spouse was "ours" forever, that our nation was always best and eternally good, that our theology was altogether true. But that weakness is our sin. In it are the seeds of our love's destruction. In our weakness is always the possibility that we will ruin the most precious thing we have to give each other, our country and our God.

When we feel it happening to us, let's not excuse it. Let's not call

it love, for it is a failure of love. The love of Jesus Christ is broad and open: it is inclusive, not exclusive: it tears down barriers instead of erecting them.

That's the Spirit of Christ that needs to be born in each of us. There is a prayer for the Church somewhere by Walter Rauschenbush that contains this phrase: "Baptise her afresh with the life-giving Spirit of Jesus"

So, we might pray - for our church - and for ourselves. AMEN

Father, help us as we tentatively take the risks of love. Help us to throw away the crutches of jealousy, chauvinism and bigotry, and to live with our hearts open: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN